

R 021530Z APR 09  
FM AMEMBASSY BUDAPEST  
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DEPT OF AGRICULTURE WASHDC  
SECSTATE WASHDC 4060

UNCLAS BUDAPEST 000267

STATE FOR EB/TPP/BTT JACK BOBO, JFINN  
USDA FOR FAS EPORTER, EJONES, DYOUNG, SNENON, GLAIDIG

E.O. 12958: N/A  
TAGS: [EAGR](#) [ECON](#) [ETRD](#) [TBIO](#) [KPAO](#)

SUBJECT: A POSITIVE STEP FOR BIOTECH ACCEPTANCE IN HUNGARY

REF: STATE 52602, STATE 160639

¶1. Summary. In keeping with the U.S. Government's strategy to publicize the benefits of agricultural biotechnology and take advantage of the favorable WTO ruling on agbiotech, Mission Hungary conducted outreach activities primarily focused on American farmers experience with biotech crops. This program was the third in a series, since fall 2008, in Hungary. End summary.

¶2. In March 2009, two farmers from the State of Iowa conducted a variety of outreach activities throughout Hungary as part of the regional effort to build interest and confidence in biotech crops in the EU. The program highlighted the practical experiences American farmers have had with biotech crops (corn and soybeans), their reasons for planting biotech crops, and the advantages biotech crops provide to their farms and to the environment. The outreach program included meetings with government and business representatives, agricultural cooperatives, farmers and students.

¶3. It also follows up on a biotech-related visit by a group of Hungarian Agricultural Parliamentarians to the United States in 2008, as well as a luncheon held by Ambassador Foley with Hungary's Parliamentary Agricultural Committee Members. Questions regarding technological advantages and potential benefits of the next generation of biotech seeds were of primary interest.

¶4. In addition to conducting a courtesy visit with Ambassador Foley in the U.S. Mission, the 2-member team held separate roundtable discussions with the Grain Producers Association (18 leading grain producers in Hungary), and a group consisting of the Hungarian Seed Association, the Scientific Deputy Director of the Agricultural Research Institute of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences staff from the U.S. Mission (10 participants). Representatives from Hungary's Ministry of Agriculture were invited, but did not attend. (Comment: At the time of the outreach visit, the EU was voting for the lifting of Austria and Hungary's ban on the planting of biotech plants. Given the sensitivity of the issue, Emboffs were told by contacts that Ministry representatives were not attending the discussion. End Comment). The team also held meetings with the President and staff of KITE, a Hungarian agricultural service and trade corporation (7 participants). The team also traveled to the northeast region of Hungary and engaged in a discussion with students at the University of Debrecen (approximately 60 participants). The program was arranged in close cooperation with the U.S. Mission in Hungary as well as agriculture and university contacts.

¶5. The team provided overhead presentations at all of the scheduled events and allowed extensive time for discussions. They offered insightful explanations into how American farmers viewed biotechnology. The most important points of the presentations were discussions about the benefits to crop management and the environment, as well as the introduction of new biotech varieties planned for commercial production. In addition, the team presented the advantages biotechnology provides to farmers in the United States in regards to reaching its energy objectives.

¶6. Most of the outreach discussions focused on the skepticism Hungarian farmers had about biotechnology, primarily because of the relatively small size of Hungarian farms which average 3-4 hectares (7-9 acres). Some Hungarian farmers asserted that they already

produced surplus yields, which they exported to a protected EU market. Therefore, they didn't need biotechnology. They argued that increasing yields through biotech would only lead to a much bigger problem with overproduction and result in lower prices. However, when the team presented information about the expected commercial release of drought resistance biotech corn varieties, the tone of the Hungarian farmers changed and suddenly they showed significant interest. The Hungarian farmers indicated that they rely predominately on rain to irrigate their crops and that they have also experienced extremely hot and dry summers in the past several years. Thus, a drought resistant biotech corn variety would certainly be useful in Hungary.

¶17. One criticism often heard in the discussions was the amount of biotech misinformation that is prevalent in the public. According to participants, most of the information available to Hungarians is about the negative and unscientific side-effects of biotechnology such as killing of bees and humans. Some even claim that one of the reasons the United States entered the Balkan war was to spread the root worm in the region. The team learned that a lot of the misinformation is being driven by politicians and non-governmental organizations, who in the words of one participant stated, "these politicians do not know what they are talking about when it comes to GMOs, but instead they see it as voting mathematics for the next election."

¶18. One important result of the outreach program was the desire for more information. Many of the outreach participants were surprised to hear about the benefits biotechnology provided to American farmers. On the whole, participants appreciated the information presented by the team. In feedback discussions with participants and organizers, the team learned that both speakers were viewed as highly credible. Participants were particularly interested in hearing more about the next generation of biotech varieties like the drought resistant biotech corn and the advantages it could provide to Hungarian farmers. Furthermore, because of the gas energy problems Hungary experienced with Ukraine and Russia earlier in the winter, farmers were excited to hear about the successful use of biotech corn in producing renewable forms of energy such as bio-ethanol.

¶19. The visit of the Biotech Team occurred at a sensitive time as the EU was in the process of voting to lift Austria's and Hungary's ban on planting biotech crops. Because of this sensitivity, Mission Hungary carefully designed the activities to be low-key events to prevent any public backlash against the team's visit. Fortunately, there were no confrontations with anti-biotech supporters.

¶10. The Biotech Outreach Team would like to express its continued appreciation to the Department of State's Office of Agriculture, Biotechnology and Textile Trade Affairs and to the Office of Scientific and Technical Affairs and Office of Capacity Building and Development for their contributions and support.

¶11. Comment: While skepticism about biotechnology in Hungary remains strong, continuing such outreach programs, particularly in challenging misinformation circulated by anti-biotech groups can be an effective tool. In a country where green biotechnology doesn't really have a positive image, Mission Hungary believes that the biotech outreach program is making inroads. As the Deputy Director of the Hungary's Grain Producers' Association stated, "in my opinion, it was successful."

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